

Is China actually helping free media in Africa?

China may provide censorship tools to autocratic regimes in Africa, but western companies still dominate this market, writes Iginio Gagliardone, a post-doctoral fellow at Oxford University.



Among the increasing number of countries filtering the internet, China has stood out in its efforts to articulate a doctrine to validate this practice. In a [white paper](#) released in June 2010, for example, Chinese authorities indicated “state security and social harmony” among the pillars of internet development, and while recognising the significance of freedom of expression, the paper stressed that when “exercising such freedom and rights, citizens are not allowed to infringe upon state, social and collective interests”. The claim that “the internet of various countries belongs to different sovereignties”, stands in sharp contrast with the USA’s pledge “for a single internet where all of humanity has equal access to knowledge and ideas”, [expressed](#) only a few months earlier by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

While it is evident that China has been developing a distinctive domestic approach to the internet and the role of media in society more generally, whether and how the ideas informing this approach are spreading is far less clear. The [few analyses](#) provided to date have been affected by the presumption that as western powers have been actively trying to export uses of the media

supporting democratisation processes in Africa, China should similarly be trying to export its version of authoritarianism abroad. But there is little empirical evidence showing this to be the case.

A recent [op-ed](#) in The New York Times, rightly pointed out that in autocratic Ethiopia, where China's EXIM bank provided a \$1.5bn loan to overhaul the country's [telecommunication system](#), free media are struggling. Opposition blogs are blocked and the prime minister argued that Ethiopia has a right to jam the international broadcaster Voice of America because of its "[destabilising propaganda](#)". China has been [accused](#) of providing the technology and expertise to make these forms of censorship possible. A few years earlier, however, it was the expertise provided by Cisco Systems and Hughes Networks, two companies based in the US, that allowed the Ethiopian government to develop [Woredanet](#), one of Africa's most ambitious and problematic e-government projects. Woredanet, which stands for "Network of district administrations", employs the same protocol the internet is based on, as well as satellite communications, to allow ministers, civil servants, and trainers in the capital to videoconference with the regional and district administrations and instruct local officials on what they should be doing and how. As an indication of the sensitivity of the project, the servers necessary to manage videoconferencing are installed in the office of the prime minister. On the one hand, Woredanet has increased the presence of the state on the ground, as a political entity, but also as a service provider. On the other hand, in a country like Ethiopia where the distinction between the party and the state is increasingly blurry, Woredanet has been also used to mobilise support in critical moments, such as before an election.

But if we turn to West Africa and we consider, for example, Chinese investments in the media and telecommunication sector in Ghana, a country with some of the "freest media" on the continent, a very different picture emerges. China has recently [provided](#) \$180m to help the Ghanaian government's efforts to use new communication technologies to increase the efficiency of the state apparatus, and regularly offers scholarships to Ghanaian journalists who are willing to continue their studies in China. This is part of a broader scheme of agreements that are turning Ghana, where large oil reserves have recently been discovered, into the recipient of one of the most generous [assistance packages](#) ever offered by China to an African country. However, according to research we have been conducting at the University of Oxford, the increasing role of China appears to have had no effects on Ghana's media system, as China's approach to the media seems to have little appeal for Ghanaian policymakers and media professionals. As a journalist working for the Daily Graphic, Ghana's leading newspaper, pointed out: "People in Ghana do not care too much about which political model China is proposing. It is the people in the west who care more about a rising China."

China's presence in the media sector in Africa is still very recent and it has been characterised by trial and error. Much can change in the coming years, but these examples point to some important trends.

First, while significant attention has been focused on China's role in providing tools to autocratic

regimes to control citizens and filter content, it is companies based in the west that still dominate this market. [Software](#) produced in North America continues to be the cyber-weapon of choice for many authoritarian regimes trying to censor the Internet, and it is a [programme](#) produced in Dublin, not in Beijing, that has been recently used by the Syrian government to disrupt SMS used by demonstrators to mobilise. The demand from authoritarian regimes for tools to control and censor has been high for a long time and Chinese companies simply entered an already crowded market. While it may be easier to criticise the government in Beijing because of the greater control it tends to exercise over Chinese hi-tech companies, from the perspective of African citizens it makes little difference whether it is because of the hypocrisy of western capitalism or China's readiness to provide what it is asked for by its African partners that their voices are silenced.

Second, looking beyond Africa's autocratic regimes to other African countries where China has supported the media and telecommunication sectors, there appears to be little evidence that China is attempting to export its model abroad or is changing the balance against freedom of expression. In countries that are committed to use new communication technologies to support a participatory and inclusive development process, China's lack of conditionalities in providing aid can arguably offer local actors more resources and room to experiment while combining ideas and technologies from different contexts.

China is certainly having an important role in Africa's media space, but to date the debate has been affected by too many prejudices and assumptions about China's intentions rather than concentrating on how China is either helping or hindering African countries to achieve their social and development goals. A less ideologically charged debate would help by identifying more compatibilities and complementarities where many see threats. We are no longer in a cold war situation where African countries must choose sides and a variety of partnerships are becoming possible.

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